

2023 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History

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People of African descent have been a part of Virginia's — and America's — story since the earliest days of the Republic. Yet only in recent years have the contributions of African Americans begun to receive the attention and esteem they are due. Dominion Energy and the Library of Virginia honor distinguished Virginians, past and present, as Strong Men & Women in Virginia History for their important contributions to the state, the nation, or their professions. These men and women offer a testament to the determination and perseverance displayed by extraordinary people during challenging times and the efforts by African Americans to create better lives for themselves, their people, and all Americans. To learn more about these remarkable men and women, visit our website at <http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/strong-men-women-in-virginia-history>.

Wendell Oliver Scott

1921–1990 | Danville
STOCK CAR DRIVER

Wendell Scott was a taxi driver, an Army mechanic during World War II, and a moonshine runner before he began racing professionally. He made his start in professional race-car driving in Danville, coming in third place in his first race. On the Virginia circuit, he endured the pervasive racism of the era. In 1959, Scott won the Sportsman Division championship at Richmond's Southside Speedway and NASCAR's Virginia State Sportsman Championship. He moved into NASCAR's major division two years later. During 13 seasons, Scott raced in 495 NASCAR Grand National (later Cup Series) events with 147 top-ten finishes — all as an independent, unsponsored driver. He won one checkered flag, in Jacksonville, Florida, but officials scored him a lap down and in second place. He contested the decision and hours later NASCAR overturned the ruling, citing a scoring error. Although Scott never accepted the explanation, he handled the slight with dignity, as he did on many other occasions. His path-breaking career was not fully recognized until after his death, and he was posthumously named to the International Motorsports Hall of Fame (1999), the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame (2000), and the NASCAR Hall of Fame (2015). The Wendell Scott Foundation honors his memory by providing educational opportunities for at-risk youth and addressing economic inequalities in African-American communities.

Reverend Raymond Rogers "R.R." Wilkinson

1923–1993 | Roanoke
BAPTIST MINISTER & CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER

Raymond "R.R." Wilkinson, one of 11 children, grew up on his family's farm in Amelia County. After serving in the Navy during World War II, he attended Virginia Union University, where he earned degrees in education and divinity. In 1958, Wilkinson became pastor of Roanoke's Hill Street Baptist Church — a position he held for more than 30 years. Wilkinson served as president of the Roanoke Branch of the NAACP from 1959 to 1968, during which he fought the segregation of public spaces in the city and job discrimination in local government and business. Despite threats to his safety, Wilkinson never stopped advocating for civil rights. A powerful orator, he successfully fought white city leaders to close a city dump located in a black neighborhood, and later protested urban renewal efforts that destroyed black communities. Wilkinson was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary, and the Roanoke Branch of the NAACP named its annual award for social justice in his honor. In 2021, The R.R. Wilkinson Foundation was established to promote awareness of Roanoke's civil rights movement, and in 2023, the city named a street for Wilkinson near the site of the former dump in Washington Park.

Ora Scruggs McCoy

1942– | Appomattox County
FARMER & COMMUNITY ACTIVIST

Growing up on her family's Appomattox County farm, Ora Scruggs McCoy learned the value of hard work, integrity, and service to others. After graduating from Carver-Price High School, McCoy attended community college and joined the local post office. In 1975, she was appointed postmaster for Appomattox County, a position she held until retiring in 2002. On her family farm, she employs conservation measures to enhance the health and productivity of the land and forest. In 2021, McCoy was recognized as Farmer of the Year in Virginia by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. McCoy served on the county's school board from 1986 to 1994, led the Appomattox Voters League, and raised money for a community center. From 2004 to 2012, McCoy served on the Board of Historic Resources for the Commonwealth of Virginia. During the Civil War Sesquicentennial, McCoy was instrumental in incorporating black history into local commemoration events and shared her family's 50-pound iron bell, which had been owned by her enslaved great-grandparents, for National Park Service ceremonies. Currently, McCoy chairs the board of the Carver-Price Legacy Museum, which oversees the historical preservation of the school.

Colonel Quentin Joseph Smith Jr., USAF, Retired

1945– | Hampton
AIR FORCE PILOT & MENTOR

As a boy growing up near Hampton's Langley Research Center, where his mother worked as a mathematician for NASA, Quentin Joseph Smith Jr. dreamed of flying planes. In 1968, he earned a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Air Force ROTC. He served with the 360th Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron during the Vietnam War and received military awards for valor in combat. Later, Smith worked as an engineer for the Navy at Dahlgren. In 1980, he joined the Federal Aviation Administration, where he helped ensure the safety of civil air transport until his retirement in 2004. Smith served in the U.S. Air Force Reserves as a pilot with the 512th Military Airlift Wing based at Dover Air Force Base and as commander of the 709th Airlift Squadron before retiring with the rank of Colonel in 1998, having logged more than 8,000 flying hours. Since retirement, Smith has remained active as a consultant on safety regulations and has devoted his time to educating young people about the Tuskegee Airmen — the first black pilots of the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, whose determination inspired him while he was the only African American in his pilot training class.

Nominated by Margaret Smith Johnson.

Sheila Bowen Taylor

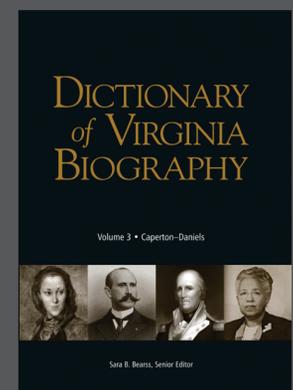
1949– | Norfolk
NUCLEAR ENGINEER & MENTOR

Sheila Bowen Taylor grew up in the St. Juliens Creek community of Chesapeake (formerly Norfolk County) near the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, where her father worked as an electrician. After earning a degree in physics from Norfolk State College (now Norfolk State University), she went on to study nuclear physics at Old Dominion University and earned a Master's in Organizational Leadership and Administration at Central Michigan University. During the 1970s, Taylor worked as a structural engineer at Newport News Shipbuilding. In 1981, she became the second woman and the first black woman hired as a nuclear engineer at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard, working in the Nuclear Engineering and Planning Department on submarines, surface ships, and aircraft carriers. There, she helped organize the Hampton Roads chapter of the Society of Women Engineers to help connect women in the engineering field. Taylor continues to mentor young people and early career professionals and promotes the importance of diversity in engineering and the sciences. Described as "the brains of the family" by her equally successful sister Sharon Bowen, chair of the New York Stock Exchange, Taylor is adamant that representation matters, and she echoes her sister's mantra, "If you can see it, you can be it."

Kendall Holbrook

1974– | Fairfax County
CEO & MENTOR

As a young student in New Jersey, Kendall Holbrook discovered her love of science and math — a love that helped her earn a degree in computer science from the University of Virginia in 1996, as well as a Master's of Business Administration from the University of Maryland in 2001. For more than a decade, Holbrook worked at Electronic Data Systems as a systems engineer, project manager, and strategy analyst before joining Dev Technology Group, headquartered in Reston, in 2010 as vice president of business development. Since 2018, she has served as Dev's chief executive officer. One of the few black women holding an executive position in the technology sector, Holbrook mentors women and underrepresented minorities in leadership. For the past three years, she has addressed the annual conference of AnitaB.org, an international organization for women in IT, of which she is also a member. Holbrook mentors in Fairfax County Public Schools and has served as the advisory board chair for After-School All-Stars, D.C., which provides academic and career exploration support for middle school students in underserved communities. Holbrook has received awards recognizing her volunteer efforts and management skills, including a Diversity in Business Award in 2022 from *Washington Business Journal*.



Learn more about distinguished African Americans from Virginia in the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998–2006) and on the Library of Virginia's websites, www.lva.virginia.gov and www.virginiamemory.com. Instructional materials and 2024 nomination forms are available at <http://edu.lva.virginia.gov/strong-men-women-in-virginia-history>.

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Wendell Oliver Scott

1921–1990
Danville

STOCK CAR DRIVER

Wendell Scott endured racism on and off the track to become the first African American to win at the highest level of stock car racing.



Reverend Raymond Rogers “R.R.” Wilkinson

1923–1993
Roanoke

BAPTIST MINISTER & CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER

A civil rights pioneer, Raymond “R.R.” Wilkinson courageously led the fight against racial injustice in his community.



Ora Scruggs McCoy

1942–
Appomattox County

FARMER & COMMUNITY ACTIVIST

Ora Scruggs McCoy is committed to preserving her family’s farm and her community’s rich African-American history.



Colonel Quentin Joseph Smith Jr., USAF, Retired

1945–
Hampton

AIR FORCE PILOT & MENTOR

Former Air Force pilot Quentin J. Smith Jr. is dedicated to sharing the inspirational legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen with young people.



Sheila Bowen Taylor

1949–
Norfolk

NUCLEAR ENGINEER & MENTOR

One of the first women to work as a nuclear engineer at Norfolk Naval Shipyard, Sheila Bowen Taylor is passionate about increasing diversity in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) professions.



Kendall Holbrook

1974–
Fairfax County

CEO & MENTOR

As the CEO of an information technology company, Kendall Holbrook cultivates a culture of inclusion and serves as a mentor to women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) professions.



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